**Young Christians leaving the Church or Faith**

<https://www.barna.org/teens-next-gen-articles/528-six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church>

June 25, 2015—It will come as no surprise to most that the U.S. population has been consistently loosening its ties with church over the past few decades. In the early 1990s, only 30% of adults were unchurched, and that number steadily increased over the next decade, rising to 33% in 2003. The decade in our immediate hindsight shows an even larger increase—today, 45% of adults are unchurched in the U.S. and that trend shows no indication of slowing.

September 28, 2011 - Many parents and church leaders wonder how to most effectively cultivate durable faith in the lives of young people.

A five-year project headed by Barna Group president David Kinnaman explores the opportunities and challenges of faith development among teens and young adults within a rapidly shifting culture. The findings of the research are included in a new book by Kinnaman titled You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church and Rethinking Church.

The research project was comprised of eight national studies, including interviews with teenagers, young adults, parents, youth pastors, and senior pastors. The study of young adults focused on those who were regular churchgoers Christian church during their teen years and explored their reasons for disconnection from church life after age 15.

No single reason dominated the break-up between church and young adults. Instead, a variety of reasons emerged. Overall, the research uncovered six significant themes why nearly three out of every five young Christians (59%) disconnect either permanently or for an extended period of time from church life after age 15.

**Reason #1 – Churches seem overprotective**. A few of the defining characteristics of today's teens and young adults are their unprecedented access to ideas and worldviews as well as their prodigious consumption of popular culture. As Christians, they express the desire for their faith in Christ to connect to the world they live in. However, much of their experience of Christianity feels stifling, fear-based and risk-averse. One-quarter of 18- to 29-year-olds said “Christians demonize everything outside of the church” (23% indicated this “completely” or “mostly” describes their experience). Other perceptions in this category include “church ignoring the problems of the real world” (22%) and “my church is too concerned that movies, music, and video games are harmful” (18%).

Reason #2 – **Teens’ and twentysomethings’ experience of Christianity is shallow**. A second reason that young people depart church as young adults is that something is lacking in their experience of church. One-third said “church is boring” (31%). One-quarter of these young adults said that “faith is not relevant to my career or interests” (24%) or that “the Bible is not taught clearly or often enough” (23%). Sadly, one-fifth of these young adults who attended a church as a teenager said that “God seems missing from my experience of church” (20%).

Reason #3 – **Churches come across as antagonistic to science.** One of the reasons young adults feel disconnected from church or from faith is the tension they feel between Christianity and science. The most common of the perceptions in this arena is “Christians are too confident they know all the answers” (35%). Three out of ten young adults with a Christian background feel that “churches are out of step with the scientific world we live in” (29%). Another one-quarter embrace the perception that “Christianity is anti-science” (25%). And nearly the same proportion (23%) said they have “been turned off by the creation-versus-evolution debate.” Furthermore, the research shows that many science-minded young Christians are struggling to find ways of staying faithful to their beliefs and to their professional calling in science-related industries.

Reason #4 – **Young Christians’ church experiences related to sexuality are often simplistic, judgmental.** With unfettered access to digital pornography and immersed in a culture that values hyper-sexuality over wholeness, teen and twentysomething Christians are struggling with how to live meaningful lives in terms of sex and sexuality. One of the significant tensions for many young believers is how to live up to the church's expectations of chastity and sexual purity in this culture, especially as the age of first marriage is now commonly delayed to the late twenties. Research indicates that most young Christians are as sexually active as their non-Christian peers, even though they are more conservative in their attitudes about sexuality. One-sixth of young Christians (17%) said they “have made mistakes and feel judged in church because of them.” The issue of sexuality is particularly salient among 18- to 29-year-old Catholics, among whom two out of five (40%) said the church’s “teachings on sexuality and birth control are out of date.”

Reason #5 – **They wrestle with the exclusive nature of Christianity**. Younger Americans have been shaped by a culture that esteems open-mindedness, tolerance and acceptance. Today’s youth and young adults also are the most eclectic generation in American history in terms of race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, technological tools and sources of authority. Most young adults want to find areas of common ground with each other, sometimes even if that means glossing over real differences. Three out of ten young Christians (29%) said “churches are afraid of the beliefs of other faiths” and an identical proportion felt they are “forced to choose between my faith and my friends.” One-fifth of young adults with a Christian background said “church is like a country club, only for insiders” (22%).

Three Spiritual Journeys of Millennials

Reason #6 – **The church feels unfriendly to those who doubt.** Young adults with Christian experience say the church is not a place that allows them to express doubts. They do not feel safe admitting that sometimes Christianity does not make sense. In addition, many feel that the church’s response to doubt is trivial. Some of the perceptions in this regard include not being able “to ask my most pressing life questions in church” (36%) and having “significant intellectual doubts about my faith” (23%). In a related theme of how churches struggle to help young adults who feel marginalized, about one out of every six young adults with a Christian background said their faith “does not help with depression or other emotional problems” they experience (18%).

Turning Toward Connection

David Kinnaman, who is the coauthor of the book unChristian, explained that “the problem of young adults dropping out of church life is particularly urgent because most churches work best for ‘traditional’ young adults – those whose life journeys and life questions are normal and conventional. But most young adults no longer follow the typical path of leaving home, getting an education, finding a job, getting married and having kids—all before the age of 30. These life events are being delayed, reordered, and sometimes pushed completely off the radar among today’s young adults.

“Consequently, churches are not prepared to handle the ‘new normal.’ Instead, church leaders are most comfortable working with young, married adults, especially those with children. However, the world for young adults is changing in significant ways, such as their remarkable access to the world and worldviews via technology, their alienation from various institutions, and their skepticism toward external sources of authority, including Christianity and the Bible.”

The research points to two opposite, but equally dangerous responses by faith leaders and parents: either catering to or minimizing the concerns of the next generation. The study suggests some leaders ignore the concerns and issues of teens and twentysomethings because they feel that the disconnection will end when young adults are older and have their own children. Yet, this response misses the dramatic technological, social and spiritual changes that have occurred over the last 25 years and ignores the significant present-day challenges these young adults are facing.

Other churches seem to be taking the opposite corrective action by using all means possible to make their congregation appeal to teens and young adults. However, putting the focus squarely on youth and young adults causes the church to exclude older believers and “builds the church on the preferences of young people and not on the pursuit of God,”

Kinnaman said. Between these extremes, the just-released book You Lost Me points to ways in which the various concerns being raised by young Christians (including church dropouts) could lead to revitalized ministry and deeper connections in families. Kinnaman observed that many churches approach generations in a hierarchical, top-down manner, rather than deploying a true team of believers of all ages. “Cultivating intergenerational relationships is one of the most important ways in which effective faith communities are developing flourishing faith in both young and old. In many churches, this means changing the metaphor from simply passing the baton to the next generation to a more functional, biblical picture of a body – that is, the entire community of faith, across the entire lifespan, working together to fulfill God’s purposes.”

*This Barna Update is based on research conducted for the Faith That Lasts Project, which took place between 2007 and 2011. The research included a series of national public opinion surveys conducted by Barna Group.*

*In addition to extensive quantitative interviewing with adults and faith leaders nationwide, the main research examination for the study was conducted with 18- to 29-year-olds who had been active in a Christian church at some point in their teen years. The quantitative study among 18- to 29-year-olds was conducted online with 1,296 current and former churchgoers. The Faith That Lasts research also included parallel testing on key measures using telephone surveys, including interviews conducted among respondents using cell phones, to help ensure the representativeness of the online sample. The sampling error associated with 1,296 interviews is plus or minus 2.7 percentage points, at the 95% confidence level.*

*The online study relied upon a research panel called KnowledgePanel®, created by Knowledge Networks. It is a probability-based online non-volunteer access panel. Panel members are recruited using a statistically valid sampling method with a published sample frame of residential addresses that covers approximately 97% of U.S. households. Sampled non-Internet households, when recruited, are provided a netbook computer and free Internet service so they may also participate as online panel members. KnowledgePanel consists of about 50,000 adult members (ages 18 and older) and includes persons living in cell phone only households.*

*About Barna Group*

*Barna Group (which includes its research division, the Barna Research Group) is a private, non-partisan, for-profit organization under the umbrella of the Issachar Companies. It conducts primary research, produces media resources pertaining to spiritual development, and facilitates the healthy spiritual growth of leaders, children, families and Christian ministries.*

*Located in Ventura, California, Barna Group has been conducting and analyzing primary research to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors since 1984. If you would like to receive free e-mail notification of the release of each update on the latest research findings from Barna Group, you may subscribe to this free service at the Barna website (www.barna.org). Additional research-based resources are also available through this website. © Barna Group, 2011.*

**Five Myths about Young Adult Church Dropouts**

electionNovember 16, 2011 - The Barna Group team spent much of the last five years exploring the lives of young people who drop out of church.

The research provides many insights into the spiritual journeys of teens and young adults. The findings are revealed extensively in a new book called, You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church…and Rethinking Faith.

The research uncovered five myths and realities about today's young dropouts.

**Myth 1: Most people lose their faith when they leave high school.** Reality: There has been considerable attention paid to the so-called loss of faith that happens between high school and early adulthood. Some have estimated this dropout in alarming terms, estimating that a large majority of young Christians will lose their faith. The reality is more nuanced. In general, there are three distinct patterns of loss: **prodigals, nomads, and exiles.**

One out of nine [11%] young people who grow up with a Christian background lose their faith in Christianity—a group described by the research team as prodigals. In essence, prodigals say they have lost their faith after being a Christian at some time in their past.

More commonly, young Christians wander away from the institutional church—a pattern the researchers labeled nomads. Roughly four out of ten [10%] young Christians fall into this category. They still call themselves Christians but they are far less active in church than they were during high school. Nomads have become 'lost' to church participation.

Another two out of ten young Christians were categorized as exiles [20%], those who feel lost between the "church culture" and the society they feel called to influence. The sentiments of exiles include feeling that "I want to find a way to follow Jesus that connects with the world I live in," "I want to be a Christian without separating myself from the world around me" and "I feel stuck between the comfortable faith of my parents and the life I believe God wants from me."

Overall, about three out of ten young people who grow up with a Christian background stay faithful to church and to faith throughout their transitions from the teen years through their twenties.

David Kinnaman, who directed the research, concluded: "The reality of the dropout problem is not about a huge exodus of young people from the Christian faith. In fact, it is about the various ways that young people become disconnected in their spiritual journey. Church leaders and parents cannot effectively help the next generation in their spiritual development without understanding these three primary patterns. The conclusion from the research is that most young people with a Christian background are dropping out of conventional church involvement, not losing their faith."

**Myth 2: Dropping out of church is just a natural part of young adults' maturation.** Reality: First, this line of reasoning ignores that tens of millions of young Christians never lose their faith or drop out of church. Thus, leaving church or losing faith should not be a foregone conclusion.

Second, leaving church has not always been normative. Evidence exists that during the first half of the 1900s, young adults were not less churched than were older adults. In fact, Boomers appear to be the first American generation that dropped out of church participation in significant numbers when they became young adults. So, in one sense, the Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) were part of the evolution of the church dropout phenomenon during the rise of youth culture of the 1960s.

In addition to continuing the dropout pattern of previous generations, today's teens and young adults (identified by Barna Group as Mosaics) are spiritually the most eclectic generation the nation has seen. They are also much less likely than prior generations to begin their religious explorations with Christianity. Moreover, their pervasive technology use is deepening the generation gap, allowing Mosaics (often called Millennials of Gen Y) to embrace new ways of learning about and connecting to the world.

Kinnaman commented on this myth: "The significant spiritual and technological changes over the last 50 years make the dropout problem more urgent. Young people are dropping out earlier, staying away longer, and if they come back are less likely to see the church as a long-term part of their life. Today's young adults who drop out of faith are continuing something the Boomers began as a generation of spiritual free agents. Yet, today's dropout phenomenon is a more intractable, complex problem." [Note: See Myth 5 for more about how the dropout problem has changed.]

**Myth 3: College experiences are the key factor that cause people to drop out.** Reality: College certainly plays a role in young Christians' spiritual journeys, but it is not necessarily the 'faith killer' many assume. College experiences, particularly in public universities, can be neutral or even adversarial to faith. However, it is too simplistic to blame college for today's young church dropouts. As evidence, many young Christians dissociate from their church upbringing well before they reach a college environment; in fact, many are emotionally disconnected from church before their 16th birthday.

"The problem arises from the inadequacy of preparing young Christians for life beyond youth group." Kinnaman pointed to research findings showing that "only a small minority of young Christians has been taught to think about matters of faith, calling, and culture. Fewer than one out of five have any idea how the Bible ought to inform their scholastic and professional interests. And most lack adult mentors or meaningful friendships with older Christians who can guide them through the inevitable questions that arise during the course of their studies. In other words, the university setting does not usually cause the disconnect; it exposes the shallow-faith problem of many young disciples."

**Myth 4: This generation of young Christians is increasingly "biblically illiterate."** Reality: The study examined beliefs across the firm's 28-year history, looking for generational gaps in spiritual beliefs and knowledge. When comparing the faith of young practicing faith Christians (ages 18 to 29) to those of older practicing Christians (ages 30-plus), surprisingly few differences emerged between what the two groups believe. This means that within the Christian community, the theological differences between generations are not as pronounced as might be expected. Young Christians lack biblical knowledge on some matters, but not significantly more so than older Christians.

Instead, the research showed substantial differences among those outside of Christianity. That is, older non-Christians were more familiar than younger non-Christians with Bible stories and Christian theology, even if they did not personally embrace those beliefs.

The Barna president described this as "unexpected, because one often hears how theologically illiterate young Christians are these days. Instead, when it comes to questions of biblical literacy, the broader culture seems to be losing its collective understanding of Christian teachings. In other words, Christianity is no longer 'autopilot' for the nation's youngest citizens.

"Many younger Christians are cognizant that their peers are increasingly unfriendly or indifferent toward Christian beliefs and commitment. As a consequence, young Christians recognize that the nature of sharing one's faith is changing. For example, many young Christians believe they have to be more culturally engaged in order to communicate Christianity to their peers. For younger Christians, matters of orthodoxy are deeply interconnected with questions of how and why the Gospel advances among a post-Christian generation."

**Myth 5: Young people will come back to church like they always do.** Reality: Some faith leaders minimize the church dropout problem by assuming that young adults will come back to the church when they get older, especially when they have children. However, previous research conducted by Barna Group raises doubts about this conclusion.

Furthermore, the social changes since 1960 make this generation much less likely to follow the conventional path to having children: Mosaics (often called Millennials or Gen Y) are getting married roughly six years later than did the Boomers; they are having their first child much later in life; and they are eight times more likely than were the youth of the 1960s to come from homes where their own biological parents were never married.

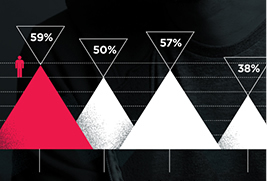
The author of the new Barna book, You Lost Me, Kinnaman asked several questions in response to conventional wisdom: "If this generation is having children later in life, are church leaders simply content to wait longer? And if Mosaics return, will they do so with extra burdens—emotional, financial, spiritual, and relational—from their years apart from Christian community? More to the point, what if Mosaics turn out to be a generation in which most do not return?

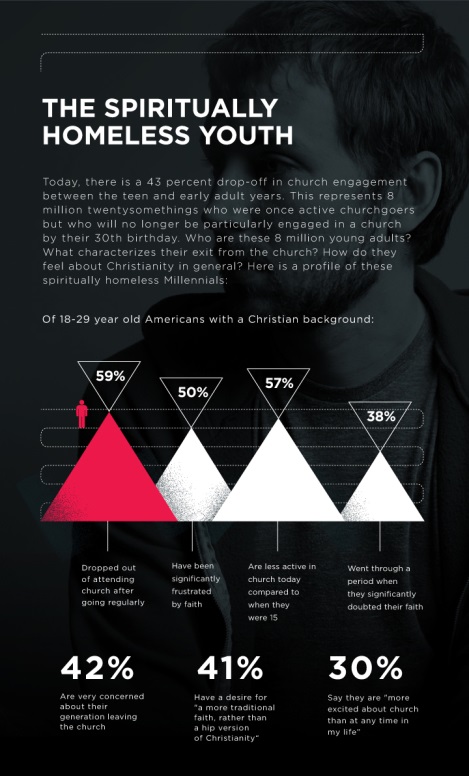
"Churches, organizations and families owe this generation more. They should be treated as the intelligent, capable individuals they are—a generation with a God-given destiny. Renewed commitment is required to rethink and realign disciple-making in this new context. Mosaic believers need better, deeper relationships with other adult Christians. They require a more holistic understanding of their vocation and calling in life—how their faith influences what they do with their lives, from Monday through Saturday. And they also need help discerning Jesus' leading in their life, including greater commitment to knowing and living the truth of Scripture."

<https://www.barna.org/barna-update/teens-nextgen/534-five-myths-about-young-adult-church-dropouts#.VZKWfPlVhBd>

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# Three Spiritual Journeys of Millennials

May 9, 2013 – Much ink has been spilled in recent months over what social analysts are calling the “rise of the Nones.” The trend describes the seeming surge in people who claim no faith or say they are unaffiliated with any belief system.

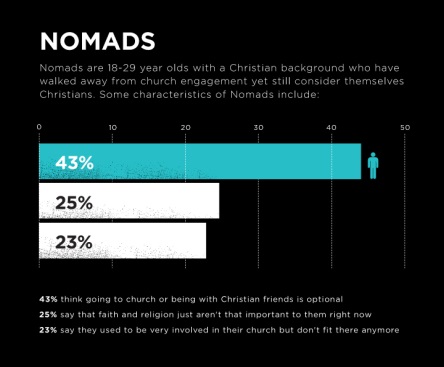
**[](https://barna-barnagroup.netdna-ssl.com/images/stories/bu-050713-spirtually-homeless_slice_1_f2.jpg)**The term rose to prominence when a [Pew Research poll](https://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx%23growth) found that the number of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated rose to almost 20%—a nearly 5% leap in just the last five years. In the subsequent months, a [Gallup poll showed similar numbers](https://www.gallup.com/poll/159785/rise-religious-nones-slows-2012.aspx%231), and most recently, in March 2013, a poll from [UC-Berkeley and Duke University](https://newscenter.berkeley.edu/2013/03/12/non-believers/) similarly found religious affiliation in the U.S. is at its lowest point since it began to be tracked.

One common thread in every survey has been the significant number of Millennials among these “Nones.” The initial Pew survey found that nearly one-in-three members of the Millennial generation (32%) has no religious affiliation. But, who are these faithless twentysomethings? Where did they come from? Did they ever claim faith? And what is it about religion that has left them cold?

Recent surveys by the Barna Group have shed light on this trend by examining those 18- to 29-year-olds who used to identify themselves closely with faith and the church, but who have since begun to wrestle with that identity. In fact, between high school and turning 30, 43% of these once-active Millennials drop out of regular church attendance—that amounts to eight million twentysomethings who have, for various reasons, given up on church or Christianity.

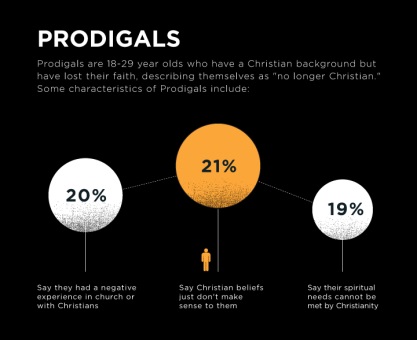
Over half of Millennials with a Christian background (59%) have, at some point, dropped out of going to church after having gone regularly, and half have been significantly frustrated by their faith. Additionally, more than 50% of 18-29 year olds with a Christian background say they are less active in church compared to when they were 15.

In his book [You Lost Me](https://www.barna.org/store?page=shop.product_details&flypage=flypage.tpl&product_id=128&category_id=1), David Kinnaman—president of the Barna Group—divides these once church-going Millennials into three spiritual journeys, which he termed “nomads,” “prodigals” and “exiles.” These groups are derived from the most common answers given to a variety of questions about religious belief and attitudes toward Christianity, churches and faith. Their answers may help church leaders and cultural analysts better understand why some Millennials are migrating from a firm faith to the side of the Nones.

**[](https://barna-barnagroup.netdna-ssl.com/images/stories/bu-050713-spirtually-homeless_slice_2_f2.jpg)Nomads** The most common spiritual journey is that of the nomads. This group is comprised of 18- to 29-year-olds with a Christian background who walk away from church engagement but still consider themselves Christians. A person in this group typically has trouble identifying with a church or a particular “brand” of Christianity, but would consider themselves, broadly, a Christian.

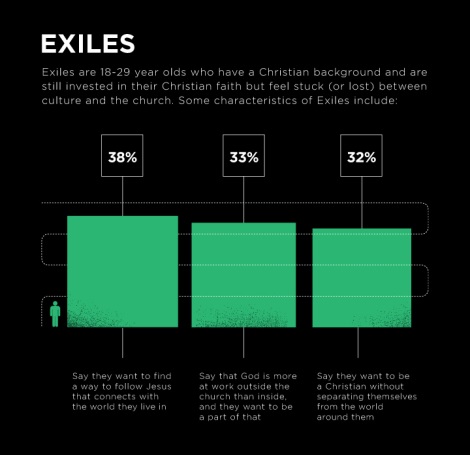
This trend may exist because more than four-in-ten American young adults with a Christian background (43%) believe going to church and having Christian friends is optional. One-quarter of that same group say faith and religion just aren’t that important to them. Additionally, nearly one-fourth of Millennials with a Christian background (23%) say they used to be very involved in their church, but they just don’t fit in anymore.

These are the people who have become the church’s nomads, young adults who see themselves as personally interested in God and religion, but not really in a formal or institutional expression of that faith. This is the group most likely to say they love Jesus but not the church—or that they are “spiritual but not religious.” They might appear to be wandering, but they would never claim to have lost their faith.

**[](https://barna-barnagroup.netdna-ssl.com/images/stories/bu_050713-spirtually-homeless_slice_3_f2.jpg)Prodigals** Prodigals, on the other hand, are those who have lost their faith. This group is made up of young adults who used to claim a personal faith, but no longer claim any Christian belief. In many of their answers in Barna Group surveys, they describe themselves as fairly certain they won’t ever return to the Christian faith.

More than one-fifth of Millennials with a Christian background (21%) say Christian beliefs don’t make sense to them. Many prodigals also admit to having had a negative experience in church or with Christians (20% of 18- to 29-year-olds with a Christian background say this). Finally, 19% of young adults who have a Christian background say their spiritual needs cannot be met by Christianity, another characteristic of prodigals.

This is the group that most often gets lumped in with the “Nones,” even though they might not be totally opposed to faith and spirituality. Rather, they’ve often had some kind of experience or realization that has made it impossible to reconcile their life with the Christian faith. Often, this is either tied to some kind of intellectual change or emotional injury, leading to a long-term dismissal of the Christian faith.

**[](https://barna-barnagroup.netdna-ssl.com/images/stories/bu-050713-spirtually-homeless_slice_4_f2.jpg)Exiles** The final category of Millennials who struggle with the Christian faith can be termed “exiles.” This group has a tough time finding a place in a church setting, but has chosen to remain within an institutional church context. They feel “lost” somewhere between their commitments to church and their desire to stay connected with the world around them. These young adults with a Christian background struggle to connect their faith or church with their everyday lives, and yet they continue in their Christian faith despite these headwinds. More than one-fifth of Millennials with a Christian past (21%) say they remain Christian and continue to attend a church, but they find that church to be a difficult place for them to live out their faith.

This group is defined by wanting to figure out how to follow Jesus in the day-to-day aspects of their lives. In fact, nearly four out of ten Millennials with a Christian background (38%) say they desire to follow Jesus in a way that connects with the world they live in. One-third of twentysomethings with a Christian background say God is more at work outside the church than inside the church, and they want to be a part of that. Notice they didn’t say they were leaving the church, but they desire a connection to a broader expression of faith.

Exiles also search for ways to remain active participants in their surrounding culture without giving up their allegiance to Christ. Hence, nearly one-third of American 18- to 29-year-olds with a Christian background (32%) says they want to be a Christian without separating themselves from the world around them.

[Watch David Kinnaman Speak on Prodigals, Nomads and Exiles.](https://www.qideas.org/video/prodigals-nomads-exiles.aspx)

**Bright Spots, Opportunities to Learn** Despite the millions of twentysomethings who are conflicted with Christianity and churches, there is still some good news for the future of the American church. That’s because there are millions of Millennial Christians who are concerned for the future of their faith, have a strong desire to connect to the traditions of the church and feel a sense of excitement about church involvement. More than four out of ten Millennials with a Christian background (42%) say they are very concerned about their generation leaving the church, and a similar number (41%) say they desire “a more traditional faith, rather than a hip version of Christianity.” And nearly one-third of young adults with a Christian past say they are “more excited about church than any time in my life.”

While these engaged young adults are good reasons not to despair over the future of American Christianity, the trend of disengagement provides a sobering backdrop. The reality is that more than one-third of Millennials who grew up in the Christian faith say they went through a period when they felt like rejecting their parents’ faith. How they deal with such struggles often defines their spiritual trajectory. They can be the people reconnecting with a vital faith; they can be nomads, claiming vestiges of their previous faith while mostly rejecting the church that fostered that faith; they can be prodigals, leaving Christianity in the rearview mirror; or they can be exiles, struggling to connect their Christianity in a complex, accelerated culture.

**Getting a Handle on Millennials** The trend of youth and young adult disengagement from Christianity seems to be picking up steam at a larger rate than normal generational trends. On these matters, previous Barna articles have explored [six reasons young people leave church](https://www.barna.org/teens-next-gen-articles/528-six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church) and [five myths about young church dropouts.](https://www.barna.org/teens-next-gen-articles/534-five-myths-about-young-adult-church-dropouts)

To help educate leaders about the Millennial generation and their faith journeys, the Barna team has recently completed the national tour You Lost Me, Live! The series of events convened nearly 10,000 leaders, pastors and parents over the past 16 months. One of the features of the events was hearing Millennials from the stage talking about their spiritual views and journeys.

Kinnaman said one of the key insights emerging from the tour was that “nomads, prodigals and exiles share something in common: being somewhere other than home. One of the characteristics of Millennial life has become the image of the traveller. They want to wander the world, both in real life and in digital ways. They want to feel untethered. There is a trend among young adults of delaying the pressures of adult life as long as possible; they want to embrace a lifestyle of risk, exploration and unscripted moments. At the same time, they want to be loyal to their peers. The generation has come to appreciate and take identity from a spiritual version of life on the road. In other words, it is a generation that is spiritually homeless.

“This transience stands in contrast to the staid, predictable, and often overprotective experience that most churches seem to offer. The gap is simple: Millennials are a generation that craves spontaneity, participation, adventure and clan-like relationships, but what they often find in churches are featureless programs and moralistic content. Leaders who hope to alter the spiritual journeys of today’s Millennials need to embrace something of a ‘reverse mentoring’ mindset, allowing the next generation to help lead alongside established leaders. Millennials need to find spiritual rootedness, but that’s not simply to preserve old ways of doing church.

“During the last 16 months of touring, our team learned that Millennials are more willing to be challenged than most church leaders are willing to challenge them. However, this does not mean simply confronting Millennials to become more conventional and embrace what they may see as ‘boring’ or ‘outdated’ forms of spiritual expression. It means inviting them into the Christian community as valued members of that community to create a new, courageous sense of home.” Twitter:[*@davidkinnaman*](https://twitter.com/davidkinnaman)|[*@barnagroup*](https://twitter.com/barnagroup)Facebook:*[Barna Group](https://www.facebook.com/BarnaGroup?fref=ts)*

**Question: "Why are so many young people falling away from the faith?"**[**http://www.gotquestions.org/falling-away.html**](http://www.gotquestions.org/falling-away.html) **Answer:**A recent survey conducted by the Barna Group, a leading research organization whose focus is on the relationship of faith and culture, found that less than 1 percent of the young adult population in the United States has a biblical worldview. Even more startling, the data shows that less than one half of one percent of Christians between the ages of 18 and 23 has a biblical worldview. The Barna Group defined those as having a biblical worldview if they believed:

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| • that absolute moral truth exists, • that Satan is a real being, not symbolic, • that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth, and | • that the Bible is completely inerrant, • that a person cannot earn his way into the kingdom of God through good works,  • that God is the supreme Creator of the heavens and the earth and reigns over the whole universe today. |

Another study by Fuller Seminary determined that the most important factor in whether young people leave the church or remain steadfast in their faith was whether **they have a safe haven to express their doubts and concerns regarding the Scriptures and their faith before leaving home.** What is critical is that our youth have adults to provide them direction and guidance regarding the apprehensions they may have about their faith. Such a refuge is found in two places: in their parents and in their church youth ministry programs.  
 However, the Fuller study also found that most church youth programs tended to focus their energies on providing **entertainment and pizza** rather than building up the young people in their faith. As a result, our teens are ill-equipped to face the challenges they will encounter in the world upon leaving home.  
 Additionally, two studies conducted by both the Barna Group and*USA Today*, found that nearly 75 percent of Christian young people leave the church after high school. One of the key reasons they do so **is intellectual skepticism.** This is a result of our youth not being taught the Bible in their homes or in church. Statistics show that our kids today spend an average of 30 hours per week in public schools where they are being taught ideas that are diametrically opposed to biblical truths, e.g., evolution, the acceptance of homosexuality, etc. Then they come home to another 30 hours per week in front of a TV bombarded by lewd commercials and raunchy sitcoms or “connecting” with friends on Facebook, staying online for hours, chatting with one another, or playing games. Whereas the time spent weekly in the church Bible classroom is 45 minutes. It’s no wonder that our young people leave the home without a Christian worldview. Not only are they not being well-grounded in the faith, **but they’re also not being taught to intelligently examine the views of the skeptics who will inevitably challenge their faith**. Most of these students are not prepared to enter the college classroom where more than half of all college professors view Christians with hostility and take every opportunity to belittle them and their faith.  
 There’s no question that a key factor in whether young people remain resolute in their Christian faith or walk away from it is the influence of their parents. It’s as the Proverb says, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” ([Proverbs 22:6](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Prov%2022.6)). One particular study found that when both parents were faithful and active in the church, 93 percent of their children remained faithful. When just one parent was faithful, 73 percent of their children remained faithful. When neither parent was particularly active, only 53 percent of their children stayed faithful. In those instances where both parents were not active at all and only attended church now and then, the percentage dropped to a mere 6 percent.  
 Today’s teens are debating within themselves how Christianity compares against the world’s competing beliefs. Relativistic statements such as, “You’ve got your truth and I’ve got mine,” or “Jesus was just one of many great spiritual leaders,” are becoming accepted in our society. Our teens should be able to walk away from the home fully trained in how to respond to their secular friends. They should be fully prepared to give a reason for the hope that is within them ([1 Peter 3:15](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Pet%203.15)): Does God really exist? Why does He allow pain and suffering to go on in the world? Is the Bible really true? Is there absolute truth?  
 Our young people must be better equipped in knowing why they believe the claims of Christianity rather than those of some other belief system. And this is not just for themselves alone, but for those who inquire of their faith. Christianity is real; it is true. And its truths should be engrained in the minds of our youth. Our youth need to be prepared for the intellectually challenging questions and spiritual confrontations that they will meet upon leaving home. A solid program of apologetics, the study of defending the truth, is vital in preparing youth to know and defend the veracity of the Scriptures and the authenticity of their Christian faith.  
 The church needs to take a hard look its youth programs. Instead of entertaining them with skits, bands and videos, we need to teach them the Scriptures with logic, truth and a Christian worldview. Frank Turek, well-known Christian author and lecturer on apologetics, in addressing the problem of our youth falling away from the faith, put it this way: “We’ve failed to recognize that what we win them with . . . we win them to.”  
 Christian parents and our churches need to do a better job of developing the hearts and minds of our youth with the Word of God ([1 Peter 3:15](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Pet%203.15);[2 Corinthians 10:5](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/2%20Cor%2010.5" \t "_blank)).  
Read more:[http://www.gotquestions.org/falling-away.html#ixzz3eYFJ76VS](http://www.gotquestions.org/falling-away.html" \l "ixzz3eYFJ76VS)

# Why so many young Christians are leaving their churches — and coming back again

By Erin S. Lane March 20 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/03/20/why-so-many-young-christians-are-leaving-their-churches-and-coming-back-again/>

“Young people these days” aren’t exactly known for our commitment.

Many of us aren’t planning to stay at our current job for more than three years, according to a [recent survey](http://futureworkplace.com/wp-content/uploads/MultipleGenAtWork_infographic.pdf). And three out of four of us are planning to move in the next five, another report [predicts](http://www.demandinstitute.org/sites/default/files/blog-uploads/millennials-and-their-homes-final.pdf). It’s no surprise nearly a third of us (the so-called “nones”) balk at the idea of formal affiliation in a religious organization.

But are we really flunking fidelity when it comes to our relationship to faith and its institutional bodies? Or are we simply re-imagining the structure of belonging?

While mistrust in the church is nothing new, the cultural acceptance of it is. Whether we choose to affiliate or not, it’s largely seen as an individual decision with little or no social repercussion. Many young people are reconceiving their relationship status with the church and other worshiping bodies as an ongoing reality rather than a one-time pledge.

Those of us born after 1980 didn’t grow up with a lot of structure. [A cover story in Time magazine](http://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/) called us the “most threatening and exciting generation since the baby boomers brought about social revolution, not because [we’re] trying to take over the Establishment but because [we’re] growing up without one.” We became adults during a widespread epidemic of mistrust in the institutions that brokered belonging, institutions like marriage, civic groups and faith communities, too.

Many of us have seen the fallout of failed promises in our parents’ marriages, our economic policies, our religious leaders. We’re cautious – hyper-intentional even – not to make commitments we can’t keep. Our on-again, off-again relationship with the church may have more to do with our impossibly high standards for commitment rather than the common complaint that we don’t take it seriously enough.

A slew of recent and upcoming books by authors like [Sarah Bessey](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1476717583?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creativeASIN=1476717583&linkCode=xm2&tag=thewaspos09-20) and [Rachel Held Evans](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0718022122?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creativeASIN=0718022122&linkCode=xm2&tag=thewaspos09-20) point to the growing struggle of young people to find their place in the church.

My own story reflects a patchwork faith common among folks my age. Like many spiritual hybrids, I inherited more than one faith tradition. I was raised Catholic, found non-denominationalism in high school, became a feminist in college, married a Methodist (pastor, no less), and now work for a Quaker-based nonprofit. Asking me to pledge loyalty to only one is like asking me to choose which parent I love most, a choice I learned early was best to avoid. Not committing has always seemed the more authentic choice.

Those under 35 seem committed to at least one idea: authenticity. We want our inner longings to align with our outer choices, like a Mobius strip of identity that has no sides. There is only singularity. We’re especially prone to feeling ourselves torn between the many options now competing for our loyalty. Perhaps this is why we curate wardrobes, playlists and Pinterest boards: We’re trying to feel whole by discerning that which doesn’t fit.

The problem with young people using authenticity as a precondition for commitment comes when it turns into a pursuit of perfection. When we’re always discerning whether a partner or a church could be “the one,” we find it difficult to commit ourselves for any solid period of time to the one we’re with. It often doesn’t feel right to commit when we can’t be sure we’ll be around in five years, let alone be the same person we are now.

“Many feel it is wrong to join a group unless they can subscribe to all its principles,” Linda Mercadante writes in her book “[Belief Without Borders](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0199931003?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creativeASIN=0199931003&linkCode=xm2&tag=thewaspos09-20).”

But no human community, not least one that professes to know something of the unknowable, can ever fully align with *all* our beliefs. The Catholicism of my childhood does not share my commitment to women’s ordination. The nondenominational church of my youth does not reflect my belief in the sacraments. The Methodist church of my husband is in some ways a more palatable version of both but lacks the intensity I’ve come to expect of families, church or otherwise.

Many of my friends have started returning to their childhood church communities, if for no other reason than it feels more faithful to recommit to what they already know than commit to uncertainty. As for me, I’ve decided to recommit to going to church with my husband rather than continuing the search alone. I am less interested in fidelity to an institution than belonging to the people who make it up.

An increasing number of millennials seem more comfortable living on the edge of belonging than at its center.

[In an article in Faith and Leadership](http://www.faithandleadership.com/dori-baker-worried-about-church-meet-these-young-christian-leaders), the Rev. Dori Baker reflected on a pilgrimage she took in 2013 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington. “The young leaders I journeyed with [didn’t] see the borders, the divisions, the walls, the pews or the collection plates,” Baker writes. “In fact, they are drawn to the edges between race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, worship style, denomination, cherished biblical passages, paid work and volunteerism.”

Old structures are giving out as we experiment with more fluid ways of life together.

American religious life will look different in 20, 30, 50 years as my generation tests our millennial ideals with experience. We may not be fully in or fully out of the church, but we’re committed to something.

We’re committed to rethinking commitment.

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